

‘It would not have been worthwhile if not for the challenges.’

Leadership Development Essay

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It would not have been worthwhile if not for the challenges. That is the insight into leadership I have gained from my Laidlaw experience, simplified down to its most fundamental and immediate principle. Yet as with any such example of a written phrase that wears a mask of ‘objectivity’, and which therefore holds the potential to be used by many to varying and perhaps contrasting ends, it must be scrutinised. In this essay I will therefore explain what its significance is to me as a leader and an individual. I will also outline how it came into being during my experience as a Laidlaw scholar, and how I hope it will guide my development as a leader in the future. At the same time, however, it is important to note that mantras such as this can change their meanings to one individual across time. With this noted, I will therefore also consider how I might have understood such an insight at the start of the Laidlaw scholarship, and compare it to its meaning to me now. To do this I will deconstruct the sentiment into its constituent parts, asking the questions: what does it mean to be to lead a ‘worthwhile’ project?; and what constitutes, and how does a leader overcome, a ‘challenge’?

I will tackle these two aspects individually. Firstly, the question of ‘worthiness’ throughout the scholarship. This takes on two aspects: the individual’s personal development as a leader across the scholarship; and also the aims and results of the project they are leading. These are linked, and the second can act as an effective signpost in assessing the accuracy of the first. At the beginning of the scholarship I had a generally similar outlook on my own leadership qualities to those I have now, as influenced by my leadership positions of the past. In my application statement, I wrote that I believed in leadership by example as the most effective form of motivation. This is because it encourages ambition by humanising the abstract idea of a ‘leader’. Narrowing the immediate proximity to a leader while also emphasising that leader’s qualities and experience makes the fulfilling of a team’s potential more achievable. This was in turn based on my experience in supervisory roles in the past, in which the position

¹ I would like to thank Lord Laidlaw, the Laidlaw Foundation, and the St Andrews Laidlaw Team for the opportunity to take part in this amazing scholarship. The lessons I have learned are so great that any future endeavour I work towards will be as a representative of the Laidlaw Scholarship. Additionally, I would like to thank my supervisors, Drs Amy Blakeway and Jacqueline Rose, for their invaluable guidance and patience throughout the duration of the scholarship. Further thanks goes to the staff at the University of Dundee archives, the staff at the Boomerang Community Centre in Dundee, and my fellow Laidlaw Scholars at St Andrews and across the globe.

of leader was closely connected to the team they were leading with regards to task management and fulfilment. With that foundation, I believe that the biggest development in my understanding of leadership now in comparison to then is how I critically frame my own leadership in relation to others. The result of the early stages of the scholarship was the quantification and categorisation of leadership styles into frameworks that help individuals assess the qualities of their associates. While these categories are not perfect, they provide a strong starting point in devising the most effective leadership strategy for different members of a team. While at the start of the scholarship I had a limited understanding of my own leadership style through experience, I am now in a position where I can relativise my traits compared to those of others and consider how best to approach positions of leadership in relation to the individuals in a group.

The second aspect of ‘worthiness’ is the outcome of the project itself. In this example, how worthwhile a project is can be a by-product of the resilience and initiative the leader has to show throughout the duration. I have learned a new understanding of resilience during my leadership project that has helped me assess the success of the project. From the beginning of the scholarship I intended to have a strong connection between my research and leadership components. This derived from the leadership talks I attended in the summer of 2020, a theme from which I learned being the importance of a link between learning and leadership and their role in the bettering of the lives of the disadvantaged and marginalised. Today it is more important than ever to have leaders who are strongly informed on the subject which they lead. Yet I did not wish for my leadership project to be a replica of the research on which I worked in the first summer. For example, I did not intend to pursue an outreach project to share the results of my research into the history of Kingsbarns, since this goal was too narrow and did not benefit enough people in the community.

I therefore learned to broaden my definition of a ‘link’ between the research and leadership. This meant taking a step back from the immediate results of the project and thinking more holistically and thematically. Facing the challenges of remote research due to Covid-19 during the summer of 2020 helped me consider the various barriers and filters that exist between the researcher and their sources. I recognised the extent to which disadvantaged communities are faced with barriers to learning, be these psychological, socio-economic, or physical. There was therefore a parallel between my own experience as a researcher and leader in the first summer of the scholarship and the experience faced by people wishing to conduct their own research today. I determined that the new goal of my leadership project, the

achievement of which would signal how ‘worthwhile’ it was, would be the successful removal of some of these barriers and helping participants in a workshop learn analytical skills independently. As a leader, the ‘worthiness’ of a project must therefore be ambitious but realistic, and the connection between a leader’s knowledge and leadership must be flexible and nuanced.

What of the challenges? There have been plenty during the creation and execution of the leadership project that have taught me important lessons about resilience and perseverance. As indicated in the quote that began this essay, the nature of the challenges is closely linked to the ‘worthiness’ of the leader’s development. The most obvious challenge has been the disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic during both the research and leadership summers. This has a strong connection to the above point about stepping back from a project to identify the core principles to work towards. This was a vitally important aspect in the planning stage of the project. As a project that was created virtually from scratch, it was important to create a balance between a determination to achieve an original goal – the breaking down of barriers to learning faced by local people in Dundee – and being adaptable to change. When it became difficult to host projects in person and enter the archives, it would have been easy to abandon the project entirely and work instead with a charity to whom I would be answerable. However, this would have made it less likely that I would fulfil my own personal goal of having a link between research and leadership, and would deprive the people with whom I wanted to work the opportunity of learning new skills. I therefore decided to continue with the original project in a different form that would reduce the risks associated with operating during the pandemic, but would also succeed in achieving its original aims. This again meant isolating the core principles of the project and thinking about how best to achieve these principles in the new framework.

How did I achieve this? There were multiple steps in the creation of the project that focused on these principles and which required resilience to accomplish. The first was recruitment. The challenge in this case was to curate a project that would help people effectively and in an accurate and nuanced way. Again, I kept the aim of having a link to research by contacting staff at the University of Dundee’s archives, who had undertaken academic research into the barriers to learning faced by disadvantaged people in the city. This reaffirmed the challenges I had identified in the preliminary planning stage and helped me focus on the aims of the project. As well as this, the research I undertook in this stage meant I was more confident in creating a project that would be meaningful and helpful to disadvantaged

people. After this was achieved, I had to contact the participants who would benefit most from a project that tackled these challenges identified in the research. I made contact with a local community centre in Dundee that hosts a regular ‘reminiscence group’ for isolated and vulnerable elderly people in the city. These participants were the perfect candidates, as they had a keen interest in local history but faced the barriers identified by the staff at Dundee. The challenge associated with these participants was to identify the most effective way of teaching new skills and demystifying the research experience. This involved another key principle that I wanted to achieve in a flexible way, which was to act as a catalyst to make the participants aware of the accessible learning opportunities they did not previously know about. This reaffirmed my understanding of the role of the leader as a facilitator and a teacher. It is a position best labelled as ‘first among equals’, and its aim is to guide followers to reach their potential and assume the role best suited to them in the pursuit of a project.

A further challenge has been to identify the best collection of material to present to the participants of the workshop. This was a different kind of challenge to those earlier mentioned as, while it did not exist in isolation, it was impacted less by the consequences of the pandemic. The importance of this was due to its role in helping create a synergy among the members of the team as well as between the collective skills of the team and the skills of the leader. In the example of the historical workshop, the material I wanted to show to the participants had to be close enough in time so as to not feel too alien, but also far enough in the past so as to avoid speaking about events that may have occurred in the lifetimes of the participants. An associated challenge in this regard was for me to remove myself from the strictly academic environment and put into perspective what is regarded as ‘common knowledge’ to those with little formal research training. At the same time, this had to be balanced with the avoidance of being patronising to the participants who face these barriers to learning that the project was attempting to overcome. This taught me that the role of a leader is dialogic with the circumstances of the team being led. It was tailored to my personal leadership style, which emphasises leadership by consent and aims to facilitate the growth of the members of the team.

Overall, these challenges have acted as the catalyst for me to learn important leadership skills. These have both complemented and developed my own understanding of leadership that I held before the project. The lessons I learned were these. Firstly, the leader should act as a member of the team rather than rising above it. This is not to say that the leader should not hold skills that can be transferred to the team so as to aid the followers to reach their collective potential. Rather, the leader should not assume authority *arbitrarily*. This links to the second

lesson: the importance of research in leadership. The most effective form of leadership is one which allows the transfer of skills and knowledge to those being led. This helps create a synergy among the team members and between the leader and the team, which additionally allows for the most effective pursuit of the collective goal. Finally, the third lesson is the most important: resilience. The creation of my leadership project has allowed me to conceive of a new definition of resilience, which describes it not as a blinkered charge towards a specific goal, but an ability to persevere by isolating what is best about a project and adapting the particulars in response to circumstances. In future leadership positions, I will always make sure to identify the key themes of a project early before commencing with the details so as to ensure a holistic and nuanced pursuit of the key aims.